

ELECTION OBSERVATION IN SOLOMON ISLANDS



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In November 2014, Solomon Islands conducted its ninth general election since independence. With accreditation from the Solomon Islands Electoral Commission and financial support from the Australian Government through the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, the State, Society and Governance in Melanesia (SSGM) program and the Centre for Democratic Institutions deployed 12 teams to undertake systematic observation, monitoring and assessment of the elections. Overall, the group comprised academics and professional staff from both programs, affiliated academics, and 60 locally engaged domestic observers. The approach employed built on observations of the 2007 and 2012 Papua New Guinea elections (Haley and Anere 2009; Haley and Zubrinich 2013).

Observations were undertaken in six provinces (Western, Isabel, Central, Malaita, Guadalcanal and Makira) and 12 separate constituencies, spread across the country to ensure a national perspective. As in PNG, constituencies were purposefully selected to ensure a representative mix. Included were rural and urban constituencies; some with large enrolments and some with small enrolments; some with high incumbent turnover and some without; different results patterns and different histories of electioneering and electoral competition.

Through our work in PNG over the past decade, SSGM scholars have developed an election observation tool that generates quantitative and qualitative data in a systematic way to inform: improved election management, future donor engagement, political economy analysis, and academic research concerning electoral politics and the changing nature of political culture in Melanesia. In the Solomon Islands case, individual observers were engaged to undertake 20 days' observations over a five-week period and were given the task of making observations during the campaign, pre-poll, polling, and counting periods. In total, observations were carried out at 148 polling stations. Observers also conducted citizen surveys during the pre-poll and post-polling periods. In total, 2564 citizens were surveyed.

Election Monitoring Tools

A comprehensive observer journal remains the major observation tool. It is intended not merely to collect quantitative data but to assess the conduct of the election and citizen experiences of it through the campaign, on polling day and in the immediate aftermath of the election. The journal is organised in chronological order starting with voter registration and concluding with the declarations.

Local observers were trained to use the journal in late October 2014 and were deployed to their respective constituencies soon thereafter. They undertook detailed observations from 10–21 November. For the first time ever, tablets were used to record citizen responses to two surveys carried out pre- and post-polling periods. This reduced data-entry errors and the time needed for data analysis. Given financial and administrative constraints, however, a rigorous debrief workshop was not possible.

The journal is divided into 12 sections, with particular attention given to: the new Biometric Voter Registration (BVR) System introduced by the Solomon Islands Government for this election, the performance of key electoral personnel, the nature of campaigning, the influence of political parties, the influence of 'money politics', vote buying and political gifting, the conduct of polling, voting irregularities, and the impact of mobile phones on the election. Importantly, observations and reflections are triangulated against citizen experiences, with individual topics explored in a number of ways.

Key Findings

A key success was the new electoral roll compiled with the use of BVR. It was well received, enjoys popular support, raised confidence in the integrity of the electoral process and makes it difficult for voters to double vote. Procedural inconsistencies and some instances of electoral fraud were identified on polling day, although these did not appear to be widespread nor significant enough to undermine the overall integrity of the process.

The Political Parties Integrity Act introduced in 2014 did not deliver the stronger parties that reformers had envisioned. Less than half (46%) of all candidates were party endorsed, and two-thirds (68%) of those elected ran as independents. The incumbent return rate in this election was significantly higher than in previous elections, with two-thirds (66%) of sitting MPs returned. Many observers attributed this to increases in Constituency Development Funds and a proliferation of money politics.

Mobile phones were used to great effect to deliver information about the election and the voter registration process. Observers also noted that mobile phones were used to share information about the election; to contact polling officials; to source information about the time and location of campaign events; and, in Honiara, to confirm voter registration details. On the other hand, observers also noted the use of mobile phones to influence voters, to intimidate voters, to facilitate gifting and vote buying, to mobilise support, to distract polling officials, to spread misinformation about particular candidates, to report back to candidates, and to co-ordinate post-voting festivities.

Major shifts in political culture, including the nature of campaigning and the influence of money politics, were also observed. The evidence about money politics in Solomon Islands elections was hitherto anecdotal. Through the observation, we obtained concrete data with respect to political gifting, vote buying and the sale of voter ID cards, made possible through the introduction of BVR. Much of the money politics centred upon these cards, with consistent reports that individual voters were receiving SBD100–200 for their cards and as much as SBD500–1000 in some cases. Across the country, supporters gathered in makeshift camps, where they enjoyed the hospitality of candidates. These were central to the distribution of cash and gifts.

Our work in PNG has shown beyond a doubt that men and women experience and participate in elections differently (Haley and Zubrinich 2013), and this also appears to be the case in Solomon Islands. Included in the journal is a multitude of questions concerning the gendered nature of politi-

cal participation. The number of women contesting elections in the Solomon Islands has remained largely unchanged over the course of the last three elections. Across the country, observers noted that women tended to play mainly support roles during the campaign period. As voters, a significant proportion of women (13%–45% depending on constituency) self-reported having experienced intimidation when voting.

Just as voting experiences are gendered, so too is money politics. In Solomon Islands, men typically receive cash and gifts more often than women, and in larger amounts. Nearly two-thirds (64%) of those who elicited cash from candidates were men. In addition, men reported receiving 20% more than women in exchange for their vote, while fewer men reported experiencing intimidation.

Another key success was the performance of the security personnel. The Royal Solomon Islands Police Force and Corrective Services worked well together, ensuring the election ran smoothly and was largely event free. Although procedural inconsistencies and some instances of electoral fraud were identified on polling day, they did not appear to be widespread nor significant enough to undermine the overall integrity of the process.

The full observation report is currently being finalised for presentation to the Solomon Islands Chief Electoral Officer, and will form the basis of a series of *In Briefs* in the coming months.

Notes on Authors

Nicole Haley is Convenor of the SSGM Program and Kerry Zubrinich is a Research Fellow at SSGM. They are both members of the Politics, Elections, Leadership and Governance research cluster. Together they have undertaken seven collaborative research projects over the past five years.

References

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